

Rocky

“He is too the Loudest In The World,” Panji tells his father, wiping the sweat from his eyes, hocking a glob of spit onto the ground. “Everyone says so, everyone in the village, even old Bu Rita, and Wayan says she’s deaf.”

“They’re only saying that because they find him bothersome, Panj,” his father says, humping another armful of grass. “It’s not an accolade for a competition, Loudest In The World.” He laughs. “It’s the villagers telling us to kill the damn bird.”

“Kill Rocky?” Panji asks, outraged. He’s standing on the road, next to their rusty Honda, keeping lookout. “We’d never kill Rocky.”

“Where did you get that silly name?” his father asks, tethering the latest batch together, running prickly rope across his hardened fingers. He barely sweats; his son is drenched in saltwater.

“Chicken Run,” Panji says, proudly. “They watched it at that nursery for the bule kids.”

“You were trespassing?” his father asks, sharply, his skull lifted by the universe, his eyes burning a hole next to his son’s bare feet. He spits.

“I wasn’t in the nursery, I crept round the back,” Panji says, put out that his father missed the main part of the story. “Like I said, we watched a film called Chicken Run and I saw Rocky, but ours is the Loudest In The World.”

“You shouldn’t watch those blue films,” his father says, resuming cutting, swiftly moving a huge blade through the sunrise, causing black flecks to fill the air, charcoal fireworks on marble, a rainbow of black bugs.

There are enough of those. Panji steps on a passing cockroach and examines the spill on his footprint.

“Black,” he declares, to no one. “Funny.”

A few fields down, the husky voice of morning singsong fills the air; a call to prayer; a reminder that daylight is coming. Panji has started to learn the recitations, to hum along to the music; his father works faster, seeing the sound only as a timepiece.

“What are we actually doing, Ayah?”

“Harvesting crops,” is the answer, delivered through pants. Panji is too young to help – and someone needs to watch for the first trickle of workers – but one day – one day – he will be twice the strength of his father and capable of harvesting twice as many stolen crops.

It is a fool’s crime; strapping pilfered wares to the side of a stuttering motor scooter and parading them in front of locals, blue, old Bu Rita, is reckless. But they borrow only a handful from the earth at a time; Panji’s father is adept at distinguishing one straw from another, one ripe green from a luscious emerald. His has honed an ability to find the best crop; he doesn’t distinguish on vague land ownerships.

They will be weighed down soon enough, his son holding the machete. The mount – the one that Panji’s father soldered himself from a discovered pram – holds

the crops solidly in place, every time. Now, the tourists – the bules – attach similar devices to their scooters to take surfboards down to the coast, to ride the waves of Pererenan or Berawa, to spend luscious, cool days playing in the water.

What a shame that Panji has to eat, his father thinks, wryly. What he would give to have a life where he could wake long after Rocky – damn, why is he using this name now – and head to the sea for five - maybe six - hours a day. Home in time to kiss his wife, play with Panji, grill some corn.

He used to surf. A long time ago, before that book was written about Eating and Praying and Loving, before the bules arrives in droves, and then the trucks and the bags of sand – why are they bringing in sand on boats? Don't we have enough sand? -, before everyone on the island had tattoos, flesh spilling everywhere, before the noise – so much noise – drowned out the sea and the grass, the great sway. Before it cost so much.

He made the board himself, of course; buying something like a surfboard would have been lost on his father. And besides, there wasn't the trade then; the first tourists were arriving following the first surfer to surf at Kuta, Bob Koke, an American who claimed to be the first surfer to surf at Kuta, although, of course, the locals were doing it long before. Bules crept in throughout the 1960's and 1970's, but they weren't really here – not really – until later, when the big brands dropped labels onto the streets, the big bules dropped yeast-crusteD beer bottles onto fresh asphalt, the big hotels shipped in Italian marble and sand.

“Still think he could win,” says Panji, oblivious to the pause in the machete, the sunrise introspection that is taking place in warm, dusty air, by the hum of the nearest mosque, the lazy trill of flies.

“Win what?” his father says. He smiles, because he once thought that he might win a surfing competition, back when he was Panji’s age, and even though memories come with pain, he’s found that it’s worth it for when the sweet parts arrive. Being a young boy with a wild dream.

“World’s Loudest Rooster,” Panji says, kicking the wheel of the scooter. It’s hot on his toes; the ground is hotter than the air, as if the day is starting from below.

“Done,” his father says, straightening up and looking down at his work; a pithy feast of opportunity; a straggle of corn; enough to carry on a bike; not enough to make any real money. That’s the way it has to be, anymore and they’re likely to get caught, or struggle to get along the thin trails that cut through the paddies.

“I don’t understand why we have to do this,” Panji whines, as the crops are strapped to his sides, as the machete blade reflects the rusty sunrise. “We’ve got rice, Ayah.”

His ayah looks down on him and smiles, the movement not reaching beyond his mouth.

They have rice paddies, yes, his father thinks, as they hum along the trails, swerving digs and potholes. But it is not enough to have paddies in the face of a global recession, when other Asian countries have rice paddies, when the price ebbs-and-flows more dramatically than the tides...

It’s not enough.

The scooter is harder to steer with a fully grown man, a boy, and sheaths of stolen corn, all astride the vehicle, like a spinning top that's set to topple, saved only by one scuffed sandal along the burnt ground, a small toe pushing away from graffiti.

By the time they get home, Panji's mother is bustling about; their hens are skittering in front of the hosepipe; the neighbour's dog is yap-yap-yapping into the heat. The canine has a chain around its neck, but the chain is about twenty feet long. Panji likes to test the distance with daily cat-calling and jeering, running in and then away at the last minute, pretending that the dog is a fierce wolf which will rip him apart.

It makes his heart drum in his chest; it is the most fun that it's possible to have.

The dog is a Kintamani, called a Kintamani-Bali by the bules, who say that it is hypo-allergenic and descends from the Australian dingo. It is a big rat that is bred from street dogs, Panji's father says. Panji wonders how a rat and a dog managed to breed.

"Guess what?" Panji says to his mother, as all three of them unload the corn, using the tip of the machete to unleash the cascade.

"What?" his mother says, and she has that look in her eyes, the one that she always has when they get home, as if she's furious but also relieved, as if she's happy to see them alive, only so that she can kill them herself.

"Ayah agrees with me about Rocky," Panji huffs, rolling a few sticks into his arms.

"Agrees with you about what?" his mother asks, sharply.

“That he’s the World’s Loudest Rooster,” Panji boasts, casting a fond glance towards his rooster, which, as if it’s heard him, let’s out a deafening crow, which the bules say is a cock-a-doodle-doo - he heard it in the bule nursery - but which he thinks is uh-uh-uhhhhhrrrr. Or maybe that’s just Rocky; he’s bound to sound different, being the World’s Loudest Rooster.

His mother laughs, which delights him.

“Don’t let Bu Rita hear that,” she scolds, her eyes smiling over her armful of stolen goods, her eyebrows raising towards the milky-blue, risen sky.

“Bu Rita is lucky,” Panji decrees, striding after his parents and casting a look down the lane, to where his friend Wayan lives with his deaf grandmother, Bu Rita, who likes to send her own dog, which is less of a rat and more like a demonic werewolf, after the kids. “People would pay good money to come and listen to Rocky.”

“Oh really?” Ayah asks; the noise is muffled by the sound of his wife yanking the cocoons of corn from crunchy stems; she’ll use the stems for animal bedding, which she might sell back to the same farmer from whence the corn came.

“Trust me,” Panji says, and he’s growing bored of the smell of corn; he drifts to a crack in the barn wall and looks out at their redundant rice field; white herons stalk through the reflections, trying to find mud eels; trying to steal Panji’s eels, or so he sees it. “Huyah,” he yells out the crack, scaring a couple of the closest birds away.

“Roll up, roll up,” Panji yells, doffing his sparkling purple top hat, stretching his face into a big smile that he’s learnt from films in the bule nursery, and not from his own parents. “Come and see the show!”

They’re parking their Yamaha’s and Scoopy’s and Honda Vario’s – look ayah, they have the same scooter as us, only they have colours, can we get ours painted blue? – in the muddy spot where the chickens used to run after the hose pipe.

Rocky’s getting tired – two shows a day is too much for him – he’s made for the early mornings, for the morning hum of the mosque, the melody of sunrise crickets and creaking asphalt – but Panji has trained him well, and some of the guests even bring him snacks.

“Come and buy a ticket,” Panji yells, as two more scooters arrive.

Bu Rita is bustling up the road towards them, her werewolf on a tattered lead, her face set in a grim line that chills him through.

“It’s that cockerel off YouTube,” voices babble.

Panji is still staring at Bu Rita as he pushes fistfuls of dirty notes into his pocket; he doles out hand-drawn tickets that he made using yellow paper from the bule nursery.

Bu Rita reaches them and her dog sniffs at Panji’s shoe, a yellow trainer with hardly any dirt on.

“Bu Rita,” Panji says, turning towards the house, willing his mum to appear – but she won’t, she’s too busy de-shelling the corn for the tourists, ready to sell before the show.

He is scared that Bu Rita won't approve of the constant crowing, the constant uhhhrs.

"I came to watch your show," Bu Rita says, retrieving a gnarled note from her pocket. Her eyes are smiling, shining, as she proffers the money with one trembling hand. "Fancy there being such success in this village. Wayan tells me you've bought new shoes?"

Panji is too stunned to speak, but the elderly lady gives his shoes an approving glance.

"Tell your dad that he should stop surfing so much and come and help you," Bu Rita says, looking at the stack of brand new surfboards leaning against the house.

"Aw, he'll be back soon Bu Rita," Panji says, grinning and pocketing the cash. "He's always back in time to grill the corn."